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ABSTRACT

Intercollegiate debate competition depends on close and fair definition of terms for effective debates. Overly narrow or slanted definitions by affirmative debate cases so limit the ensuing argument that debate, as it is now conceived, cannot go on. Improper stipulation shifts fields of argument onto the affirmative case's grounds, rendering the negative, and thus the debate, impotent. Restoration of common sense in definitions, perhaps enforced by judges is mandatory for proper continuation of intercollegiate debate. (CH)

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STIPULATED DEFINITIONS AND COMMON SENSE

David W. Shepard

When handling words already used in a relatively stable way, to ignore pre-existing meanings is to promote ambiguity and confusion. 1

The 1971-1972 debate resolution gave affirmative debaters a singular opportunity to exercise their creative genius in the exploitation of their duty to define terms. Responsibility became a license to define "criminal and subversive activities" and "restrict information gathering activities of the government" in terms that had remote and shady relations to the original resolution. "For the sake of argument" served not as a base for argument but as a pretext for it. In one tournament, "criminal and subversive activities" and "restrict the gathering of information" emerged as (1) legalize marijuana, (2) federal aid to education for law enforcement officials, and (3) abolish grand juries. Then there is the affirmative case from the AFA National Tournament: "In order to abolish military conscription...greater control should be placed upon the gathering and utilization of information about U. S. citizens by government agencies."[2]

Had bizarre definitions been introduced in public debate, the definitions would have caused only momentary embarrassment. A United States senator thundering on the floor of the senate that "We ought to legalize marijuana so that we can abolish the Mann Act!" may attract a crowd in the gallery. His colleagues may even counsel him with respect to the consumption of spirituous liquors. But in intercollegiate debate the affirmative has the solemn responsibility to define terms. We are faced with a situation in which any eccentric definition is therefore proper. The sanction carries sufficient weight that a negative team protesting topicality is deemed

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unsportsmanlike. Besides, judges hesitate to censure affirmative teams for the enormities committed by the judges' teams.

Perhaps someone is confused by what is possible and what is proper in the stipulated definition. Because it is proper that the affirmative team define terms, any definition is proper. The propriety of the duty is confused with the propriety of the act. The possibility of defining "green" to mean "elephant" sanctifies the propriety of the definition. Here, two questions are in order. When are stipulated definitions technically improper? What are the effects of these solecisms upon reasonable argument?

I WHAT IS "PROPER" STIPULATION?

Debaters and coaches ought to read Max Black's chapter on definition. Two of his rules will suffice for this brief analysis. The stipulated definition ought not to ignore previous usage. The stipulated definition ought to be intelligible. Black's rules are not the revelations of moral or natural law, but pieces of sound advice which will, hopefully, lead to reasonable argument.

"Freedom to assign meanings by means of a stipulated definition is... restricted by the definiteness of the previous usage of the definiendum."[3] Previous usage of "restrict information gathering" and of "criminal and subversive activities" may reflect some vagueness and nebulosity. That vagueness should inspire chaste, not profligate, definitions. Existing ambiguity scarcely justifies equating "legalize marijuana....federal aid to education....abolish the draft" with "gathering information on U. S. citizens" or with "criminal and subversive activity." If popular parlance equated the terms, none would have been astonished when the new definitions emerged in the debates. Thus the rule-of-thumb appears to be that a

stipulated definition is improper when it flies in the face of previous usage.

Black also suggests that a stipulated definition "should be intelligible to the person addressed....The definiens and the definiendum should be equivalent, i.e., substitutes for each other in every context."[4] Equivalency and intelligibility raise questions in formal logic which we will avoid.[5] But factual considerations are mandatory. An inspired debater who stipulates that by "Minneapolis" he means "Lake Enemy Swim" will scarcely be intelligible to the persons addressed if the available sources do not equate the two terms.

II WHAT ARE THE EFFECTS OF IMPROPER STIPULATION?

A stipulated definition is improper when it violates the rules, but what is improper about violating rules? The stipulated definition which ignores previous usage and which ignores equivalency is improper because that stipulation leads to shifts in fields of argument, leads to unintelligible argument through contextual shifts, and invites hypothetical-existential confusion.

Shifts in fields of argument.[6] Let us approach the shift in fields of argument from the direction of inherency. Consider a nut-shell version of the Santa Barbara case. "We propose to restrict information gathering by governmental agencies so that we may abolish military conscription, for: Military conscription is morally harmful; . Amnesty will restore dignity to America." If we concede an inherent moral evil in conscription, we have not established an inherent moral evil in information gathering for conscription. If we establish an inherent moral flaw in our amnesty policy, we have established no inherent flaw in gathering information on those who have heretofore violated the law. If we upset arguments about the

draft or about amnesty, we affect the dignity of America not one whit. If we establish that the government is misusing information it has gathered, i.e., using information for purposes other than the draft or for prosecution of legal violations, we disprove nothing with respect to the draft or to amnesty. We have old-fashioned logical necessity. A conclusion is logically necessary if and only if its negation upsets the premises.[7]

Let us consider the shift in fields of argument from the direction of criteria. What are the criteria for determining the benign or malign effects of government information gathering? The benign or malign effects of marijuana laws? Of the effects of marijuana? Of the absence or presence of national dignity? The improper collection and misuse of evidence pertaining to the violation of marijuana laws may indict federal or local investigative procedures, but the criteria for the improper use of evidence are not the criteria for the legalization of marijuana. The criteria for the legalization of marijuana pertain to the effects of the drug upon its users. Granted, if one determined that marijuana is harmless, it is then proper to argue for the repeal of the law. Information gathering remains beside the point. A stipulated definition does not entail the equivalency of "legalize marijuana" and "government information gathering" in every context. The affirmative stipulation muddles two sets of criteria.

A shift in fields of argument is guaranteed when the definition is either smaller or larger than the terms to be defined. Again, to Black: "The definiendum should not be wider than the definiens....The definiendum should not be narrower than the definiens."[8] What happens when the definitions are out of balance with the terms to be defined? The stipulations that "by <u>information gathering</u> we mean <u>gathering information on marijuana</u>

users and legalize marijuana" and "by greater controls on information gathering we mean only information pertaining to the draft" introduce parallel generalizations. Each is an independent resolution with its own burden of proof and its own field of argument. Conclusions in one generalization neither entail nor follow from the evidence and premises in the other generalizations. The stipulated definition which shifts fields of argument introduces logical and factual confusion.

For monumental shifts in fields of argument, one need only turn to the 1972 AFA National Debate finals. There are at least nine statements--each requiring its own burden of proof--emerging from the affirmative stipulated definitions:

1. Greater control should be placed upon the gathering and utilization of information about U. S. citizens by government agencies.
2. Military conscription is morally harmful.
3. We should abolish military conscription.
4. Our amnesty policy is wrong.
5. We should grant amnesty to all Viet Nam draft evaders and deserters.
6. State and federal agencies ought not to gather information for draft purposes.
7. State and federal agencies ought not to gather--and ought to destroy existing records--information on draft evaders and deserters.
8. Military branches may not (ought not to) compel re-enlistment for terms of more than four years.
9. There will never be another war like World War II.

Are we confusing propositions with supporting arguments? But a supporting argument creates confusion when it requires a burden of proof above, beyond, and independent of its parent argument. "I need a salary increase" and "We all need salary increases" are parallel generalizations

with independent burdens of proof. One does not satisfy the burden of proof for generalization A by substituting parallel generalization B for specific evidence. Statements 1 and 2 from the AFA finals demand separate burdens of proof. 3 requires its own burden of proof as does 4. 2 and 3 are related in a straightforward problem-solution sequence, and so are 4 and 5. But 2-3 and 4-5 are not related necessarily. And the criteria for the evaluation of the draft and for the evaluation of our amnesty policy are not relevant to the evaluation of government information gathering.

6 and 7 stand if the 2-3 and 4-5 combinations can be established. But 6 and 7 would be in effect anyway if the two policies were adopted. What of 8 and 9? Neither has much to do with information gathering. The assumption that the military can compel re-enlistment for more than four years is false.[9] Once truth or falsity is established, we can debate the advisability of continuing, discontinuing, or instituting the practice. Yet re-enlistment policies seem far narrower than "information gathering." And 9 shifts fields of argument. The assertion invites stupendous contrafactual debate in which even speculation on "Would Caeser's X Legion have emerged triumphant at the Little Big Horn?" would make sense.[10] We will ignore the field-shifting and the metaphysical booby-traps in the moral resolution.

There appear to be sound reasons for Black's advice that one ought to attend to previous usage and that the definition should be neither wider nor narrower than the term defined. The practical effect of the stipulated definition which ignores the advice is to stun the opponents. The impractical effect is field-shifting which encourages conclusions following neither from the evidence nor from the premises.

<u>In every context</u>? That "the definition should be capable of

substitution for the definiendum in every context" creates problems with evidence. Do sources arguing for the legalization of marijuana mean by their terms that greater controls ought to be placed upon the gathering and utilization of information on criminal and subversive activities? Do sources arguing that greater controls be placed upon government information gathering really mean abolish the draft and grant amnesty? If the terms are equivalent, then we can drop one set of terms in the slot in any source and the source will make sense. Otherwise we have nonsense and a shift in fields of argument with a vengeance. Unless the affirmative team can show that its sources define terms as does the affirmative and that the sources equate different resolutions, the affirmative stipulation leads to unintelligible argument. If we argue that the debate teams ought to be supplied with new Fords and by Fords we mean Chevrolets, we had better be able to show that Ford literature means Chevrolet and that Chevrolet literature means Ford.

Existential or hypothetical?[11] Does stipulation commit the affirmative and the negative to a for-the-sake-of-argument word game? For the sake of argument, let us stipulate that tyrannosaurs exist. We may then argue the need for strict game laws to preserve the beasts and that no one be permitted to maintain one of the creatures within fifty miles of the city limits. As long as we argue hypothetically, we make some kind of sense. When we charge to the legislature urging protective legislation for tyrannosaurs, we cease to make sense. When we skid from hypothetical to existential, we commit a frightening equivocation. Of course, affirmative debaters equivocated admirably with the 1972 resolution. Was it not their duty to define terms?

III SOLUTIONS?

If debate is an exercise in reasoned discourse, then reasonable

definitions must precede argument. Reasonable argument is unattainable when that argument depends upon excessively slippery stipulations which substitute new resolutions for the original or upon stipulations contrived to fit the conclusions. To advance a resolution, to support it with parallel generalizations dependent upon dubious oppinion, and then to conclude that one has proved one's case is to take argument upside down. Debate must be rescued from its linguistic quagmire.

For one thing, topicality is a legitimate issue in debate. We can turn to a legal paradigm. No prosecutor will remain long in court if he stipulates that "By drunk while driving I mean murder in the first degree. The defendant pleads guilty to driving under the influence, therefore he should be hanged." If the courtroom is unsatisfactory, let us turn to parliamentary law. If the affirmative defines its terms so that the affirmative introduces a substitute motion, then that substitute must be set aside until the main motion is perfected.[12] Further, a chairman is empowered to rule a frivolous or dilatory motion out of order. Perhaps a debate judge is entitled to rule a frivolous and dilatory stipulated definition out of order.

If we do not restore some common sense to the stipulated definition of terms, intercollegiate debate simply cannot stand public inspection.

REFERENCES

[1]Max Black, Critical Thinking (2nd ed.; Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1962), 209.

[2]Stanley G. Rives (ed.), "1972 National Debate Tournament Final Debate: Should Greater Controls be Placed on the Gathering and Utilization of Information about U. S. Citizens by Government Agencies?" JAFA (Summer, 1972), 235-260.

[3]Black, 209.

[4]Black, 210-212.

[5]If the definiens and the definiendum are equal, we have a tautology. If we have a tautology, we have a sentence which communicates no information. If the sentence communicates no information, it is unintelligible! See Wesley C. Salmon, The Foundations of Scientific Inference (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1966), 5-11. Henry W. Johnstone, Jr., Philosophy and Argument (The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1959), 85-92.

[6]Stephen Toulmin, The Uses of Argument (Cambridge, 1958), 11-43.

[7]Henry W. Johnstone, Jr., Elementary Deductive Logic (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1954), 31-35. Toulmin, 151.

[8]Black, 212.

[9]The military cannot require re-enlistment for any period of time. Someone may be confused over "convenience of the government" and the reserve status of personnel in various branches of the armed forces.

[10]There are a number of similar predictions the affirmative might have cited to support the contention. "Hitler cannot afford to start a war."

"Japanese pilots aren't any good--they're near-sighted." The negative might have cited Korea as similar to World War II and someone might have mentioned the Israeli blitzkrieg in the middle east.

[11]Johnstone, Elementary Deductive Logic, 108, 117.

[12]Robert's Rules of Order Newly Revised (New York: Scott, Foresman and Co., 1970), 132-133.

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